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The Novel as a Vehicle for Organizational Inquiry: Engaging with the Complexity of Social and Organizational Commitment

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abstract

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the development of the approach to organizational inquiry which employs the concept of 'lay reading' of literary fiction as a vehicle for exploration. We argue that this enables development of complex understandings of social and organizational concepts and phenomena. We illustrate our application of lay reading by discussing the notion of commitment as we identify it in academic literature, and in the fiction of Aldous Huxley and Milan Kundera. In considering the stories of individual characters, we point to attitudes towards commitment that exemplify complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence. We posit that the lay reading approach facilitates engagement with multiple theoretical perspectives, in support of students' and organizational actors' meso-theorising about relevant concepts and phenomena.

Introduction

In this paper, we seek to contribute to a development of an approach to critical engagement with concepts and phenomena in contemporary society by students of management and organization, and by organizational actors; one which is grounded in interpretation and meaning construction by them. The approach is that of 'lay reading' (DeVault, 1990, 1999) of the literary novel in order to facilitate the readers' processes of meso-theorising and critical reflection. In order to illustrate our argument, we address the concept of 'commitment' between individuals, and between the individual and social/organizational groups, as well as ways in which individuals are considered to demonstrate attachment to particular beliefs and values through conformance with, or rebellion against prevailing mores. We consider the range of theoretical frames and conceptualisations of commitment to be found in managerial and critical organizational texts, and seek a way of enabling students and organizational actors to reflect on them, and to relate them to a context with which they are familiar.

We show the possibilities of our approach through our own reading of Aldous Huxley's (1932/1994) *Brave New World* and Milan Kundera's (1984) *Unbearable Lightness of Being*. We refer to other readings of these novels and discuss the notion of commitment

through our interpretation of the representations of the lived experiences of the characters John and Lenina (Huxley, 1932/1994), and Sabina and Tomas (Kundera, 1984). In contrasting the coherent and consistent attitudes of John and Sabina with those of Lenina and Tomas, we argue that the approaches to life of the latter symbolise a 'postdichotomous' (Beech and Cairns, 2001) ability to reconcile ambivalent ways of thinking/acting.

In our discussion of the concept of commitment as interpreted through the novel, we draw contrast with much of the managerial literature. We argue that it is conceivable to live exhibiting neither explicit compliance with, nor opposition to, norms of behaviour generally accepted within society, or any other social group. Moreover, we observe the possibility of a simultaneous display of conformance and non-conformance. We posit that such an approach does not necessarily stem from apathy, disinterest, hypocrisy, or self-marginalisation, but constitutes a route followed out of choice by certain individuals in organizations and society in general.

We acknowledge that the use of literary fiction has been proposed, developed and problematised by a number of authors (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994/2004; De Cock and Land, 2006; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Phillips, 1995). We argue that the lay reading approach of DeVault (1990, 1999) enables students and managers to develop complex understandings and conceptualisations of phenomena through engagement with non-academic texts with which they are familiar, in order to "experiment in the use of personal response as part of an archive for analysis" (DeVault, 1990: 106), and to relate their personal, emergent understanding to a range of theoretical perspectives presented in management and organizational literature.

We recognise that the concept of commitment is comprehensively discussed in academic literature (e.g. Cohen, 2000; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1988, 1991, 1997; Morrow, 1993; Mulinge, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Weick, 1995). However, we find extant examples of engagement with it problematic on two grounds. First, managerial approaches tend to dichotomise individuals as either being 'committed' or 'not committed' to the organization (e.g. Mowday et al., 1982; Oliver, 1990; Schnake, 1991), and second; as Knights and Willmott (1999) point out; beyond the context of business and management education, critical academic texts are unlikely to form major reference sources for organizational actors attempting to make sense of their own environment. Hence, there is a danger that the thinking of those actors is likely to remain embedded within a paradigm of duality and exclusion.

We recognise the limitations of the proposed approach, in that "any representation is partial, selective, and constructed" (DeVault, 1990: 888). The pursuit of social and organizational inquiry through analysis of concepts depicted in literary fiction is also embedded in a literary tradition and framed within social, psychological and semiological boundaries. However, within the lay reading tradition, novels are seen to assist readers "in making sense of the world", as well as constituting "a basis for their own assertions about society" (DeVault, 1990: 888). Here, we employ our own 'lay reading' of the two novels to provide an illustration of how literary fiction might be

used to highlight the complex and ambiguous nature of commitment between individuals, groups, organizations, and society, as defined in normative terms.

In our teaching practice, we seek to inspire the development of a critical understanding of other concepts frequently encountered in management education and organization studies, e.g. 'culture', 'power' and 'structure'. We aim to do this by enabling the students to engage with a piece of literary fiction of their own choice, and to critically reflect upon their selected concept as portrayed within it, by reference to a broad range of theoretical perspectives.

The Literary Approach in Organization Studies

A number of authors (e.g. Butler, 1997; Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994/2004; De Cock, 2000; DeMott, 1989; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Phillips, 1995; Waldo, 1968) have advocated the use of the literary novel as a vehicle for social and organizational inquiry. References to literary fiction in the context of social sciences have a rich historical tradition (c.f. De Cock and Land, 2006). Phillips points to the relationship between social science and narrative fiction and suggests that whilst "social scientists discover things, writers make things up; social scientists observe reality, writers invent alternative realities" (1995: 626). According to Waldo, fictional "literature helps to restore what the professional-scientific literature necessarily omits or slights: the concrete, the sensual, the emotional, the subjective, the valuational" (1968: 5). Phillips states that "(n)arrative fiction provides organizational analysis with an additional point of contact in the everyday world of 'real life'" (1995: 635), while Butler suggests that the social scientist "can learn from the art and craft of the novelist, dramatist, journalist, film-maker, (and) soap opera creator" (1997: 945).

In their discussion of the relationship between the domains of literature and organization, De Cock and Land (2006) identify three 'modes of engagement' by which it might be characterised. In Mode One, they see this engagement through the application of literary theory to organizational literature in an attempt to "problematise organization theory, thus enabling it to reinvigorate itself" (Czarniawska, 1999: 12). Mode Two applies literary genres for the purpose of "production and presentation of organizational knowledge" (De Cock and Land, 2006: 520). Mode Three draws upon 'great' literature as an educational resource for the development of management knowledge and practice. We read Mode Three, as presented by De Cock and Land, as viewing novels from a realist perspective. Whilst we situate our own approach within the broad frame of Mode Three; the 'novel as resource'; we identify three levels at which application of this mode is exemplified in the extant literature.

At the first level, we find examples of novels employed as 'surrogate cases' (e.g. Boland, 1994/2004; McDaniel, 1978), read as 'truths' in the tradition of literary realism (c.f. Dickstein, 2005; Watt, 1957). At the second level, they are used as stories of organizing (e.g. Czarniawska, 1999; Hofstede, 1994/2004), drawing analogy between depictions and lived experience. Finally, at the third level, novels serve as vehicles for organizational analysis (e.g. De Cock, 2000; Jacobsson, 1994/2004; Linstead, 2002) for

complex engagement with phenomena at a higher level of abstraction. Having identified these three levels, it is within the third level that we locate our own approach to applying literary fiction.

As Guillet de Monthoux (1983/1991) exhorts academics to turn to the literary form of the novel in order to understand organizational decision making, here, we employ the novel to support our inquiry into the nature of commitment, specifically by drawing upon the writings of Milan Kundera and Aldous Huxley. We find references to the works of both authors in academic literature. For example, Kundera is cited in literature on organization (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Kostera, 1997; Linstead, 2002), and in the broader field of sociology (Gurstein, 2003). Huxley's term 'brave new world' is widely used by different writers, but is commonly interpreted as symbolising a fictional, dystopian society; and juxtaposed with problematic features (c.f. Daniels and Bowen, 2003), or contrasted with desired characteristics (c.f. Filley and House, 1970) of the 'real world'.

We choose our selected novels for two purposes. First, as a pairing, they complement each other through presenting contrasting ideological commitments by the respective authors. Huxley offers a satire on Americanisation and hyper-capitalism, whilst Kundera engages in critique of the lived Marxism of 1960s Czechoslovakia. Second, both authors go beyond realist representation of society. Kundera's text can be read as offering insights not only into "the politics of working under a totalitarian communist regime", but also, into "philosophical notions of what is 'really' of value in life" (Knights and Willmott, 1999: 9). Huxley's *Brave New World* is an example of a dystopian, rather than a realist novel. However, despite their transcendence of realism, we employ these texts, "not because they violate logic, but because they ruin the conventional order of the surface that is our life" (De Cock, 2000: 597).

We acknowledge that reading is an 'active process' (Tompkins, 1980), in that each interpretation of a text is a learned, socially organized activity (DeVault, 1990). Different approaches to reading novels constitute alternative constructions of meaning, which can adopt a variety of forms, such as: a naïve, child-like reading of a story; a more sophisticated theme and content analysis; or a specialised, professional interpretation, e.g. that of the literary critic (DeVault, 1990), which will frequently be grounded in the critic's personal political or theoretical agenda (De Cock and Land, 2006). In seeking to escape the confines of the 'expert reader'; whilst acknowledging that this will never be fully possible in the teaching or consultancy context; we turn to DeVault's (1990, 1999) concept of 'lay reading' of novels. This approach seeks to privilege involved actors' meaning construction and meso-theorising processes over those of the 'expert' reader, such as the literary critic or the organizational theorist.

In our analysis, we consider representations of commitment in the experiences of key characters in the selected novels, in order to illustrate the unproblematic nature of an existence not rooted in dichotomy to those thinking/acting it. We posit that this way of using novels as a basis for analysis can be extended to include other concepts, theories, and social and organizational phenomena.

Characterizing the 'Lay Reading' in Organization Studies

The concept of lay reading

DeVault's (1990, 1999) presents the concept of the 'lay reading', as an alternative to 'the interpretive traditions within which novels are written and read' (DeVault, 1999: 133), such as the 'expert reading' of the literary critic. The term lay reading, however, must not be considered as implying a naïve mode of interpretation, devoid of critical analysis of form, content, and of the processes of sense-making. Rather, it is one which recognises "the situated character of reading" (DeVault, 1999: 105) in which "the readers' genders, historical contexts, and purposes for reading" (DeVault, 1990: 887), along with other aspects of their personal acculturation, are seen to be integral to both the processes and outcomes of interpretation. Whilst we illustrate our use of *Brave New World* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* through problematising the commitment literature, we acknowledge that within the academic community, the same texts are interpreted differently. In relation to our selected texts, the different factors that influence interpretation may be found across the range of academic fields in which they are employed (cf. Daniels and Bowen, 2003; Gurstein, 2003; Sleigh, 2002). Here, we position our reading within the context of organization studies and we relate our interpretation to those of others in this field (e.g. Knights and Willmott, 1999; Linstead, 2002; Parker, 2002).

In accordance with DeVault (1990, 1999), we view the lay reading approach as having possibilities both for use as a "personal/reflexive research strategy" (1999: 105), for critical comparison of different readings of a text within "reading communities" that encompass "widely varying political scenes and societies" (1999: 106), and as a means of opening up critical reflection on the diversity of theoretical perspectives presented in the range of managerial and critical texts, in relation to key organizational concepts.

Multiple lay readings of selected texts

In the central section of this paper, we offer a 'negotiated lay reading' of our selected novels, constructed by two authors who have differences in gender, nationality, age, professional and academic qualification, and in general experience of social and organizational acculturation. Our reading of the texts should be positioned as one of a number presented by a group "of readers with different experiences (who) can develop new frameworks for interpretation" (DeVault, 1990: 916). As such, like Guillet de Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges, we see the overall value of lay reading as "expand(ing) the space of shared meanings… to provide an interpretive scheme to readers interested in the theory of organization and management" (1994: 13-14). Whilst, within the confines of this paper, we cannot fully develop a critical comparison of our reading of the selected novels with those of other readers; whether literary, social, or organizational theorists; we provide examples of how the broader 'reading community' of organizational and management scholars draws upon and interprets these two novels "as a basis for their assertions about society" (DeVault, 1999: 106).

Within the field, the two novels are employed as vehicles for organizational analysis and exploration of a variety of concepts. For example, Linstead (2002) draws upon *The*

Unbearable Lightness of Being in his discussion of 'organizational kitsch'. More closely related to our consideration of commitment is Knights and Willmott's (1999) reference to Kundera's text in order to explore notions of 'identity', 'subordination', and 'resistance'. In his critique of contemporary managerialism, Parker (2002) uses Huxley's *Brave New World* beside the work of Franz Kafka to discuss concepts of 'rationalisation' and 'hierarchy'. *Brave New World* serves as an example of how, contrary to "much of the post-war organizational consensus… (t)he individual becomes the site of resistance against the corporation" (2002: 150). For the 'reading community' (DeVault, 1990: 106) of management scholars, we see that there is some relationship between the way both Knights and Willmott, and Parker use this work to challenge assumptions about concepts pertaining to organizations in mainstream literature and our engagement with the concept of commitment.

Problematising 'Commitment' in Managerial and Organizational Literature

In our illustration of the application of the lay reading approach, we choose to engage with the concept of 'commitment'. Whilst we could have selected any one of a variety of relevant concepts, commitment has "been of considerable importance in organizational literature during the past 25 years" (Gautam et al., 2004: 301). It is discussed in both mainstream (e.g. Ahmad and Bakar, 2003; Gautam et al., 2005) and critical (e.g. Hakim, 1995; Hancock, 1999) literature, and has its place in the teaching curriculum on organization and management. Linstead et al. point out that the notion of "commitment seems to be at the core of more modernist attempts to redefine motivation" (2004: 297). Whilst a detailed review of the organizational commitment literature is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, here, we provide a summary of the main conceptualisations of, and approaches to the topic.

The term 'commitment' is defined (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, undated) as a "willing(ness) to give your time and energy to something that you believe in". Building upon this notion, the term 'organizational commitment' is identified as the degree of attachment that an individual has to her/his organization (Arnold et al., 1998), and has been presented as a desired element of the relationship between the worker and the enterprise (e.g. Porter et al., 1974; Randal, 1990). Early organizational commitment research (Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Wiener and Gechman, 1977; Mowday et al., 1982) was empirically synthesised by Meyer and Allen (1991), to encapsulate three components, those of: 'affective commitment' (Meyer and Allen, 1991), i.e. the degree of psychological attachment; 'normative commitment' (Allen and Meyer, 1990), i.e. the degree of obligation to stay; and 'continuance commitment' (Meyer and Allen, 1988), i.e. the employee's assessment of the costs and benefits of staying or leaving. In empirical studies, the development of commitment has been linked to positive outcomes both for individuals and organizations, in contributing to higher levels of satisfaction, well-being and productivity, as well as to lower levels of staff absenteeism and turnover (c.f. DeCotiis and Summers, 1987; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997).

Lincoln and Kalleberg (1990) argue that, as organizations have moved away from direct and coercive forms of control, they seek to increase employee commitment in order to foster the development of "more obedient, productive and stable employees" (Mulinge, 2001: 286). They proffer four types of 'structural condition' which contribute to the achievement of this desired state. The assumption here, and in other works (e.g. Cohen, 2000; Kanter, 1968; Morrow, 1993; Randall and Cote, 1991), is of organizational commitment as an instrument which can be shaped and used by managers in order to fulfil organizational objectives. Whilst commitment is seen as a positive characteristic, of mutual benefit to the individual and the organization, lack of commitment is portrayed in a negative way, whereby highly committed employees exhibit contempt for idleness and self-indulgence in others (Schnake, 1991). As a consequence of this dialectical discourse, individuals are depicted either as identifying and involving themselves with (Oliver, 1990; Van Dick, 2001, 2004) and forming affective attachment (Mowday et al., 1982) to social groups, or as detaching themselves from them. Where they profess either commitment or challenge to some set of mores, whilst simultaneously displaying behaviour that runs counter to their stated beliefs, people are likely to be branded as hypocrites. In the mainstream literature, there is little space for ambiguity and problematisation of the notion of commitment.

In contrast to the positivistic discourse of interlinked individual/organizational benefit through commitment, contemporary critical responses posit that these conceptualisations are problematic and gendered (Hakim, 1995). Hancock (1999) argues that the instrumental actions of management; aimed at developing highly motivated employees through the implementation of cultural management strategies; may result in "the production and reproduction of a deeply disinterested and enervated workforce; one which demonstrates enthusiasm neither for corporate goals nor indeed the furtherance of their own life-projects" (1999: 155). However, whilst critical discussions of the concept of organizational commitment address the complexity of issues related to it, they are unlikely to form part of the canon of practising managers, grappling with the day-to-day problems of organizational life (Knights and Willmott, 1999).

In proposing the approach outlined here, we advocate that reading communities of students of organization and management share their multiple lay readings in order to reflect on the different meanings of commitment in a way which goes beyond unambiguous interpretation. This, we hope, will open up possibilities for postdichotomous (Beech and Cairns, 2001) analysis; recognising that there is no straightforward oppositional definition of commitment/non-commitment, and associated terms of inclusion/exclusion, involvement/alienation, etc. We see this form of inquiry as a means of critical engagement with mainstream literature and, at the same time, as contributing to and complementing the body of critical management literature, as well as supporting the development of students' and organizational actors' understanding of and reflection on it.

Commitement in the Fiction of Kundera and Huxley

We now present an illustration of our contribution to the lay reading approach, through consideration of the representation of the concept of commitment as we find it in the literary fiction of Kundera (1984) and Huxley (1932/1994). Within a reading community but one of as many readings as there are members to the group. Like DeVault, we find it necessary to "quote some rather lengthy passages" from the selected novels in order to meet the "(s)ociological convention" of a "scholarly article" (1990: 892-3).

(In)consistency, complexity and ambivalence of attitudes towards commitment

In considering commitment, or its absence, in the relationship between individuals and society, we compare the consistency of attitudes exemplified in the actions of the characters Sabina and John with the ambivalence of Tomas and Lenina. To Sabina and John, the notion of commitment seems unproblematic at a theoretical level, although very much so at the level of lived experience. Sabina, an artist born and educated in Communist Czechoslovakia, emigrates successively to Switzerland, France and the United States during her lifetime. Symptomatic of her interactions and relationships with those she encounters on her journeys through space and time is the avoidance of all commitment. John's story, on the other hand, demonstrates an ongoing desire for commitment to social norms, and for forming relationships with others.

In contrast to the coherence and consistency of attitudes towards commitment demonstrated by Sabina and John, in the stories of both Tomas and Lenina we find a more complex approach to involvement with, and attachment to individuals and society. Tomas, a surgeon in Prague, loses his professional position due to his confrontational engagement with the Communist regime, and moves through a succession of posts to become, first, a general practitioner, then a window cleaner, and latterly, a driver in an agricultural cooperative. During his life, he maintains relationships with a number of females: his wife Tereza, his 'best friend' Sabina, and various 'erotic friends'. However, as we will seek to show, this apparent state of constant flux in Tomas's relationship with society and individuals does not symbolise a lack of emotional commitment over time, or a hypocritical attitude. Similarly, the character Lenina, a 'Beta' employed in the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, combines a deeply-ingrained commitment to the impersonal societal norms of the World State with instances of expressed individuality, non-compliance and emotional attachment.

Sabina: avoidance and escape

The Czech society of the 1960s, home at the time to both Sabina and Tomas, exemplifies notions of commitment and fidelity to both family and the state. Sabina, however, does not subscribe to the values of fidelity and long-term attachment, and seeks to detach herself from all people and places that could be important to her.

> After completing school, she went off to Prague with the euphoric feeling that now at least she could betray her home… Her longing to betray her father remained unsatisfied: Communism was merely another father, a father equally strict and limited. (Kundera, 1984: 87)

In her adult life, Sabina leaves her husband and deserts her lover Franz, who "assumed that Sabina would be charmed by his ability to be faithful, that it would win her over. What he did not know was that Sabina was charmed more by betrayal than by fidelity" (1984: 87). Until her death, Sabina refuses to commit to physical or emotional bonds, and in the same way she abandons individuals, she wanders nomadically through Swiss, French, and American society, remaining an outsider in each case.

For Sabina, "(s)eeing is limited by two borders: strong light, which blinds, and total darkness. Perhaps that was what motivated Sabina's distaste for all extremism" (1984: 90). Sabina resolves the dichotomies of life neither through synthesis along some centre path, nor through accepting the simultaneous validity of both extremes. For her, the continuous and ultimately futile search for disengagement and detachment presents the only option. Towards the end of her life, Sabina reflects upon the notion of commitment, but "(s)he was well aware it was an illusion…Though touched by the song, Sabina did not take her feeling seriously. She knew only too well that the song was a beautiful lie" (1984: 249).

John: dominant desire

Contrary to Sabina's efforts to avoid commitment to individuals and society, John's life is dominated by the quest for attachment and emotional bonds. Born in New Mexico, John is raised by his mother, Linda; a 'Beta' from the World State who is accidentally left behind following an excursion to the Reservation. Within the New Mexican Indian society, John is seen as different because of his lighter complexion, and of the promiscuity of his mother, which goes against the monogamous social conventions of the Reservation. Although a stranger in the eyes of the community he lives in, John craves a sense of belonging and acceptance. His need for commitment to societal norms is so strong that, having been excluded from the ceremony for initiation to manhood, John follows the rituals alone. '"I did it by myself, though,' he added. 'Didn't eat anything for five days and then went out one night alone into those mountains there."' (Huxley, 1994: 119). Taken back to the World State, where emotional commitment to individuals is proscribed, John not only refuses to break the ties with his mother, but also tries to build a long-term relationship with Lenina, eventually confessing, "I love you more than anything in the world" (1994: 168).

Whilst he seeks to build life-long commitment to Lenina, John also attempts to change the nature of society. As his mother lies dying in hospital, he becomes more and more frustrated by the lack of emotion and engagement displayed by the staff. Eventually, he tries to provoke the 'Delta' orderlies into revolt. '"(D)o you like being slaves?' the Savage was saying…his eyes bright with ardour and indignation. 'Do you like being babies? Yes, babies. Mewling and puking…I'll teach you; I'll *make* you be free whether you want to or not"', he cries (1994: 186-7). Having failed in this provocation, John eventually seeks solace through becoming a recluse, but he is hunted down and taunted by the masses. He is initially irritated but, "(i)gnoring their (helicopters') tiresome humming…(he) dug at what was to be his garden" (1994: 222). Gradually, his annoyance turns to anger, then to violence as he chases one of his tormentors and "slash(es) at her with his whip of small cords. Terrified, she (turns) to flee, but (trips) and (falls) in the heather" (1994: 227). As this scene unfolds, John finally engages with

the crowd, succumbing to the *soma* and hedonism, and joining in the 'Orgy-porgy'. Symbolic of John's inability to live with his own hypocrisy is the final act, in which he takes his own life.

Tomas: ambivalence and struggle

In contrast to the trials and tribulations of Sabina and John, Tomas displays ambivalence towards the concept of commitment and its importance in his life. In relation to women, he seeks to deny emotional attachment. "The unwritten contract of erotic friendship stipulated that Tomas should exclude all love from his life" (Kundera, 1984: 12). At the same time, towards his wife Tereza, he desires "to watch over her, protect her, enjoy her presence but (feels) no need to change his way of life" (1984: 12). In comparing these seemingly contradictory attitudes, we might question whether Tomas's behaviour symbolises notions of 'love' and 'commitment', and in so doing, we might consider him a hypocrite, as he simultaneously denies attachment in order to avoid deeper relationships. However, for Tomas, it is not a matter of either making conscious choices between opposites, or of hypocritically hiding one beneath the surface appearance of the other. Rather, "Tomas came to this conclusion: making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite" (1984: 14).

Initially, he finds it difficult to accept the possibility of living simultaneously at the opposites of commitment and non-commitment. "At first he denied it. Then…he argued that his polygamous way of life did not in the least run counter to his love for (Tereza). He was inconsistent" (1984: 15). Eventually, however, Tomas learns to "carr(y) his way of living with him as a snail carries his house…the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing" (1984: 27). Tomas's ability to live a postdichotomous lifestyle in his relationships with others causes great discomfort to Tereza, who wishes to live at the pole of monogamous commitment, and is seen as weakness by Sabina, who thinks he lacks the courage to leave his wife. "He was in a bind: in his mistresses' eyes, he bore the stigma of his love for Tereza; in Tereza's eyes, the stigma of his exploits with the mistresses" (1984: 22). "Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships? He was", but the key point is that "he failed to see the need… He saw no more reason for (giving them up) than to deny himself soccer matches" (1984: 20).

In his relationship with the political regime, Tomas exhibits similar ambivalence. He compares the behaviour of Communists in post-War Czechoslovakia to Oedipus's response to finding out that he had slept with his mother, and questions their sanctimonious cries "in defence of their inner purity… The analogy so pleased him that he often used it in conversation" (1984: 171). He develops his critique in a text which he seeks to have published in a newspaper produced by the Union of Czech Writers. When the article appears, Tomas finds that it has been shortened and emasculated by the editor. "Tomas was far from overjoyed" (1984: 172) by this.

When the chief surgeon of the hospital where Tomas works summons him, warning that the article represents a threat to his career, Tomas tells him that he does not see the publication as being of any great importance: "To tell… the truth… it couldn't be any

less important" (1984: 173). However, when the chief surgeon suggests that he retracts his words, he refuses, saying "I'm afraid I'd be ashamed" 1984: 174). This shame is not related to any possible negative response to withdrawal from his colleagues, but is directed inwards. The text is simultaneously of no importance and of the greatest importance to Tomas.

Throughout most of his life, Tomas struggles with decisions which he faces. In many cases, "(h)e was not at all sure he was doing the right thing, but he was sure he was doing what he wanted to do" (1984: 214). Latterly, Tomas finds comfort in his ability to see life as complex, yet to face it with apparent lack of seriousness. When they are living in the cooperative, Tereza tells Tomas,

> 'It's my fault you ended up here, as low as you could possibly go.' 'Low? What are you talking about?' he responds. 'Surgery was your mission.' She sa(ys). 'Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission. No one has. And it's a terrific relief to realize you're free, free of all missions'. (1984: 305)

Lenina: unproblematic duality

As Tomas's ability to live life at both extremes of (non-)commitment causes consternation to those he engages with, so too, Lenina confounds her colleagues. The social conventions of the World State require members to engage in non-committal sex with multiple partners, whilst unquestioningly devoting themselves to fulfilment of the motto of "Community, Identity, Stability" (Huxley, 1994: 1). At the end of work one day, Lenina asks her friend Fanny, '"Who are you going out with tonight?', to which the response is 'Nobody.' Lenina raise(s) her eyebrows in astonishment" (1994: 32). To her, non-participation in the rituals of shared sexuality is to be challenged, yet, when Fanny later questions Lenina about her singular attachment to one individual, Henry Foster, over a period of three months, she responds, "No, there hasn't been anyone else…(a)nd I jolly well don't see why there should have been" (1994: 34).

Lenina later forms a similarly exclusive bond with Bernard, and joins him on the trip which results in him bringing John back from the Reservation. Thereafter, she develops a strong attraction to John. However, whereas John seeks exclusive commitment to and from Lenina, she considers it unproblematic to contemplate a relationship with him, whilst remaining polygamous within broader social circles. As she prepares to meet him at one of Bernard's parties, she tells herself, '"I shall be seeing him, talking to him, telling him… that I like him – more than anybody I've ever known. And then perhaps he'll say…"' (1994: 151). When the imagined engagement with John fails to materialise, she has no problems accepting the Arch-Community-Songster's invitation to leave the party with him, to return to his residence where, as "(t)he golden T lay shining on Lenina's bosom, (s)portively, the Arch-Community-Songster caught hold of it. 'I think…I'd better take a couple of grammes of *soma*"' (1994: 155), says Lenina.

The conflict between John's desire for exclusivity in their relationship and Lenina's ability to be both singularly devoted to John whilst openly engaged with others is shown to be beyond resolution when he tells her,

> 'How much I love you, Lenina'… (T)he blood rushed up into Lenina's cheeks. 'Do you mean it, John?' However, as he proceeds to expound, 'in the Malpais, people get married', she exclaims,

> 'Get what?' The irritation had began (sic) to creep back into her voice… 'They make a promise to live together for always.' 'What a horrible idea!' Lenina was genuinely shocked.' (1994: 167-8)

Beyond Dichotomies of Commitment and Detachment

In discussing the nature of commitment to society and individuals through our interpretation of the characters Tomas and Lenina, we observe a lack of consistent and predictable levels of emotional attachment. However, we do not read the seeming ambivalence to social norms as indicative of a hypocritical and morally relativistic approach to life. Rather, we propose that the assumptions which underpin Tomas and Lenina's being and behaving are not open to analysis according to externally imposed frameworks of meaning, whereby they might be read as inconsistent and self-contradictory when viewed through the lens of dichotomous ontologies (Beech and Cairns, 2001). We suggest that these characters live according to beliefs which do not confine actions and interpretations within a normative, dichotomous framework; of right/wrong, moral/immoral, committed/uncommitted. For example, Tomas lived his life at two "separate and irreconcilable" extremes of commitment and non-commitment, finding both of them "equally appealing" and not mutually exclusive (Kundera, 1984: 27). Similarly, Lenina demonstrates selectivity in her choices of when and how to conform to the social norm of universal promiscuity, whereby "one's got to play the game. After all, everyone belongs to everyone else" (Huxley, 1994: 37). Lenina both excludes the concept of love from her thinking and declares that she cares deeply for John; she expresses her feelings for him whilst rejecting his declaration of commitment towards her. As highlighted previously, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas attaches great significance to his article for the Union of Czech Writers' newspaper, to an extent that he refuses to retract it under pressure from the Communist regime and loses his job as a consequence. However, when questioned by his chief surgeon, Tomas indicates that, to him, the publication is of no importance.

Through our comparative analysis of the notion of commitment and related concepts, as represented in the novels, we posit that it is possible for individuals to find it unproblematic to adopt seemingly contradictory stances. The conceptualisation of commitment that we develop through our lay reading of the novels is one in which it is neither set in dichotomous and exclusive opposition to that of detachment, nor conflated with it.

In contrast to mainstream management and organization theories of commitment, our reading of the novels suggests that the examples of Tomas and Lenina indicate that neither psychological nor behavioural commitment can be guaranteed through instrumental means; by application of some simple 'formula' (e.g. Reis and Peña, 2001), through training (e.g. Ahmad and Bakar, 2003), or by reward (e.g. Eby et al., 1999). Some theorists (e.g. Gautam et al., 2004) argue that commitment is correlated with identification, which enables individuals to become 'anchored' and hence, "to persuade and be persuaded" (2004: 312). However, we do not view lack of commitment as a denial of identification with the principles of a given form of organization. For example, we see that Tomas identifies with the institution of marriage, but his own participation in it does not follow the generally accepted understanding of it in his

society. In relation to Lenina, it is clear that she identifies very strongly with the principles of the World State, yet this identification does not translate into unquestioning commitment and consistent behaviour in accordance with them. In contrast to Lenina's ambivalence, John's identification with societal norms and his vain search for some form of unproblematic commitment lead him to a state of confusion, and detachment from the very group that he wishes to be part of.

Whilst we argue against an instrumental view of commitment – and find ourselves agreeing that the contemporary world has "grown to be too complicated for the human subject to either comprehend or control" (Hancock, 1999: 171) – we do not see that this necessarily leads the individual to "find him or herself enmeshed in a web of indifference and enervation, resigned to their status as slave" (1999: 171). Rather, we see that Tomas and Lenina are both indifferent and resigned to much of what characterises their respective societies yet, at the same time, are engaged in acts of mental and physical rebelliousness. Like Hancock (1999), we see challenge to instrumentalism, not as a mere "dissolution of the very mode of subjectivity upon which such managerial ambitions rest" (1999: 171), but as "offer(ing) new opportunities as well as potential new problems" (1999: 172).

Thoughts on the Application of the Lay Reading

In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate the possibilities of an approach to social and organizational inquiry which employs the concept of lay reading (DeVault, 1990) of novels in order to explore phenomena and concepts within the context and thinking of involved actors. In the field of teaching management and organization theory, we see this as offering the possibility of an inclusive, pluralist approach to learning that allows reading communities of students to reflect upon a range of theoretical perspectives from a starting point grounded in their own a priori knowledge and understanding of the world, as developed through reading literary fiction. In the consultancy arena, we see it as enabling a trans-disciplinary frame of thinking, in that the novel can offer a starting point for "joint activities… in producing representations and the activities that develop from using representations" (1990: 889) that are not initially grounded in any particular disciplinary context. In both contexts, the nurturing and support of a climate of open exchange of views, opinions and critically informed argumentation is aimed for. Through an iterative and reflective cycle of engagements; that sees these various elements as separate but related, discrete but intermingled, and that deals with concepts at a level of theoretical abstraction grounded in concrete experiences (of reading, interpretation and interaction); we hope to promote critical exploration of the complexity and ambiguity of social and organizational life, such that the literature neither "becomes a prop to embellish organizational research… or, conversely, a means of demonstrating that the world is essentially impenetrable" (De Cock and Land, 2006: 529).

We acknowledge that the use of novels in teaching management and exploring organizational issues is not a new idea. Examples of how novels can be drawn upon in management education are to be found in extant literature; most notably, in their book

Management Lives, Knights and Willmott (1999) offer one such approach, based upon their own extensive teaching experience. However, there are key differences between their approach and that which we propose. First, whereas Knights and Willmott (1999) prescribe four texts, we advocate that students and managers be allowed to select their own example of literary fiction, in order to create space for the student/manager's engagement with novels belonging to her/his own canon, and for including texts set within cultural contexts with which she/he identifies. However, we acknowledge that this choice cannot be seen as completely free, since the selection may be influenced by the sources we necessarily use to illustrate application of the method. In our own teaching practice we draw upon George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and David Lodge's *Nice Work*; choices which are not without socio-political implications for the teaching (or consultancy) intervention.

Second; whilst like Knights and Willmott, we set out a 'menu' of concepts that the students must choose from; we see a key difference in the mode of interpretation. Knights and Willmott identify relevant extracts from their prescribed novels and offer their own analysis of selected concepts, not as illustration, but as a form of 'reality' (Knights and Willmott acknowledge the polemic nature of their text, but we posit that the reader might miss this disclaimer in any 'skim reading' exercise). In our application, we encourage students to draw out extracts which they use in analysing their selected concept and discussing it in relation to the academic literature.

Third, we propose that analysis and interpretation of the text be related to consideration of a wide variety of theoretical frameworks – with students/managers selecting, and justifying, their own preferred stance. By contrast, we would suggest that the range of theories that Knights and Willmott refer to shows a clear preference for those inspired by Marxian and/or labour process theory principles. Of course, in our teaching, not all theoretical frameworks are aired in the lecture theatre context, and whilst we seek to introduce the students to both mainstream and critical perspectives, we do not disguise our own interpretative preferences. Moreover, we realise that encouraging the students to choose conceptual frames they are comfortable with is, in itself, a political act.

We acknowledge that, despite the indications of our above comparison with that of Knights and Willmott (1999), our proposed approach is not fully liberating. We are aware that our own students (and managers we might engage with) are subject to our power/knowledge regime. However, we consider that, despite the unavoidable limitations of our own being within the project, the lay reading approach offers potential for "experiences between theory makers (to) be exchanged on a more equal footing" (Czarniawska, 1999: 57).

In the broad context of contemporary organization, we suggest that the lay reading approach could be applied in facilitating the processes of meaning construction and making sense of the world around them by members of various groups; such as 'flexible workers', 'knowledge workers' and 'McJob' holders. In privileging the interpretation of the lay reader, this approach offers an alternative to expert analysis according to the frames of explanation imposed by particular theoretical perspectives, and avoids reduction of complex concepts to simplistic and clearly definable managerialist terms. We see it as acknowledging that individuals use fictional accounts to make sense of the

world, and are capable of using literary texts in their processes of meso-theorising about concepts, contexts and experiences, and that the sharing of these accounts and their multiple interpretations enables collective sense making.

Finally, we believe that the use of the literary novel as a tool for analysis enables engagement with social phenomena "as a more personally relevant endeavour" (Phillips, 1995: 643). We agree with Czarniawska-Joerges (1994/2004: 318), that "the novel accepted and understood the paradoxicality of social life before the postmodern thinkers did", and that critical consideration of representations of characters in fiction, as well as the symbolic meaning of their thoughts and actions, enables and supports creative discussion of the lived experiences of individuals in contemporary society.

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